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ABSTRACT

This study examined sex-role typing in older adults' interpretations of young children's behavior. Participants were 48 older adults averaging 64.7 years of age. Videotapes were made of the play behavior of each of two toddlers, a female and a male matched in body type, hair length, dress (plain tee shirt and shorts), and in the activities in which they were filmed. Subjects were shown the two videotapes under one of two conditions: half the subjects were deceived as to the sex of the children they were viewing, while the other half were correctly informed of the children's sex. Subjects were asked to indicate the amount of contact they had had with small children and to rate each child's behavior using a number of sex-linked adjectives. Results showed that females did not describe the children along stereotypic sex-role dimensions, ascribing similar characteristics to children of both sexes. Males reporting little contact with children described the children in stereotypic sex-role terms, while males reporting high contact reversed this pattern, describing children as possessing fewer stereotypic characteristics of their attributed sex. (Author/JMB)

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Interpretations of Child Behavior by Older Adults

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Abstract

Forty-eight older adults were shown videotapes of two children, one labeled male and one labeled female. Half the subjects were deceived about the sex of the children. Subjects then rated the behavior of the children using a number of sex-linked adjectives. The analyses indicated that females did not describe the children along stereotypic sex-role dimensions, ascribing similar characteristics to children of both sexes. Males reporting little contact with children described the children in stereotypic sex-role terms, while males reporting high contact reversed this pattern, describing children as possessing fewer stereotypic characteristics of their attributed sex.

Interpretations of Child Behavior by Older Adults

Research in the area of sex-role development has demonstrated differences in male and female behavior, even in very young children across a wide range of behaviors. Any theory of sex-role development that attempts to explain the sources of these differences must consider the effects of differential socialization as a function of the sex of the child being socialized (Rothbart and Maccoby, 1966). Studies concerning parent perceptions of their own behavior and their attitudes toward their children have revealed differences in the socialization of infants as young as three weeks of age (Moss, 1967). The kinds of behaviors permitted, the degree of aggressiveness tolerated, and the amount of nurturance and restrictiveness given children differed with the sex of the child in question (Aberle and Naegle, 1952; Emmerich, 1962; Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957; Tasch, 1952).

Very little of the research on sex differences directs itself toward the issue of differential socialization as a function of the sex of the socializer. Several studies, however, have found that mothers and fathers are different in their interpretations of the behavior of their male and female

children (Rothbart and Maccoby, 1966; Maccoby and Feldman, 1972; Fagot, 1974). Meyer and Sobieszek (1972) studied the stereotypic interpretations of sex-typed behavior in university-connected men and women. Despite finding no statistically significant differences between men and women in their analysis, Meyer and Sobieszek interpreted trends in their data to suggest that males with low contact with children showed a slight tendency to attribute stereotypic sex-role characteristics to children. Females, expecially those reporting high contact with children, described children in a reverse stereotypic way. Further, subjects attributed more of both masculine and feminine qualities to children described as being the subject's own sex.

In an extension of the Meyer and Sobieszek (1972) study, Sobieszek (1977) found similar trends: low-contact males more stereotyping than high-contact males, and males in general more stereotyping than females. Females again displayed reverse stereotyping, but the effect was strongest for low-contact females in this study. In addition, a similar trend toward same-sex bias in the attribution of both masculine and feminine qualities was observed.

Other investigators have also found stereotypic patterns in the interpretations of child behavior (Seavey, Katz, and Zalk, 1975) found stereotypic adult responses toward a three-month-old infant to be a function of the sex of the adult and the attributed sex of the infant. Fagot (1973), using a sample of adults who had low contact with children, also found women significantly less stereotyping of child behavior than men. Even with a sample of five- to eight-year-old children, Nadelman (1974) found boys to be more stereotyping than girls in their interpretations of child behavior.

In the present study, the research on sex-role typing in the interpretation of children's behavior was extended to the population of older adults. The well-educated, younger subjects used in previous studies may have been less likely to hold stereotypic sex-role expectations than members of the population at large. It was expected that the socialization of older adults would be more clearly divided along stereotypic sex-role dimensions, and that their descriptions of children's behavior would, therefore, more strongly reflect sex-role stereotyping. Specifically, it was predicted that older adults would tend

to describe a child's behavior as more masculine for a child labeled male, and more feminine for a child labeled female. In addition, it was predicted that this sex-biased label effect would interact with the sex of the adult observer, and with the amount of contact the adult has had with children.

Method

Subjects

Forty-eight adult volunteers (32 women and 16 men) from Senior Centers in the greater Newark-Wilmington Delaware area and from a retirement village in central New Jersey were used in the study. The subjects were all white, representing both lower and middle socio-economic levels, with an average age of 64.7 years. A total of 68 subjects had participated in the study, but 20 subjects (19 women and one man) were excluded from the analysis because of incomplete data. The mean age of the excluded subjects was 68.3 years.

Procedure

A videotape was made of the play behavior of each of two toddlers, a 21-month-old female and a 22-month-old male. The children were matched in body type, hair length, dress (plain tee shirt and shorts), and in the activities in which they were filmed. In order

to minimize sex bias, the children were taped playing with neutral toys such as a ball, teddy bear, and animal pulltoys. Each tape was edited to approximately 10 minutes in length, providing a representative sample of the children's play behavior. Pretesting indicated that the sex of the children was not apparent from viewing the tapes.

A behavior rating scale was adapted from Meyer and Sobieszek (1972). The rating scale consisted of items in the form of descriptive adjectives, each to be scored on a six-point Likert scale reflecting degrees of the presence or absence of that characteristic. There were a total of 17 adjectives, nine based on male sex-role stereotypes (independent, sturdy, self-assertive, aggressive, impulsive, active, inquisitive, confident, alert) and eight based on female sex-role stereotypes (affectionate, passive, cuddly, coy, cooperative, delicate, shy, receptive). The sex-role stereotype of each of the adjectives was obtained from Maccoby (1966).

On a cover sheet, subjects were also asked to indicate the amount of contact they have had with small children on a six-point rating scale from "none" to "a great deal." As in Sobieszek (1977), the top two points on the scale were used to define the high-contact group,

and the remaining four points defined the low-contact group. Thirty-eight subjects were identified as high contact (28 females and 10 males) and 10 subjects were identified as low contact (four females and six males).

The subjects were shown the two videotapes under one of two conditions. Half the subjects were deceived as to the sex of the children they were viewing, while the other half were correctly informed of the children's sex. The order of presentation of the tapes was counter balanced within sex of subject and the deception/non-deception groups. After viewing the first tape, the subjects were asked to complete the rating scale for that tape. The second tape was then viewed, and a second rating scale completed.

Analysis

The ratings for each of the 17 sex-role adjectives were summed to yield a total activity scale (TAS). The ratings for the eight female items were then reversed, so that a high score on every item indicated a masculine characteristic. The ratings for both male and female items were then summed to yield a masculine attribution scale (MAS).

Two separate 2 (sex of subject) by 2 (label of child) repeated measure analyses of variance (ANOVAs)

using MAS and TAS as the independent variables were calculated, with the label of child being the repeated measure. In addition, a D score was defined as the difference between the MAS for a child labeled male and the MAS for the same child when labeled female. A 2 (sex of subject) by 2 (amount of contact) ANOVA was obtained using the D score as the dependent variable.

Results

The results of the 2 (sex of subject) by 2 (label of child) ANOVA on MAS revealed no significant main effects for sex of subject ($F[1, 46] < 1$), label ($F[1, 46] < 1$), or the interaction ($F[1, 46] < 1$). The means for this analysis are presented in Table 1. The same analysis using TAS, however, revealed a significant main effect for sex of subject ($F[1, 46] = 3.42$, $p < .10$), but no significant effect for label ($F[1, 46] = 2.16$) or for the interaction ($F[1, 46] < 1$). The means for this analysis are presented in Table 2.

For the D score analysis, there were no significant main effects for sex of subject ($F[1, 46] < 1$) or contact ($F[1, 44] = 2.11$), but the effect for the interaction was statistically significant ($F[1, 46] = 2.89$, $p < .10$). The means for this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Discussion

The results of the ANOVA on MAS provide no direct support for the hypothesis of sex-role stereotyping in the description of children's behavior by older adults. There was no difference in the MAS scores for the tapes labeled male and the tapes labeled female. It may be that older adults are not stereotyping in their descriptions of children.

There are, however, several other possible explanations for this finding. It may be that too advanced a reading level was required by the task, that the task was too complex, or that it required excessive attention or concentration for this sample of older adults. Their responses thus may have reflected difficulty with the task itself rather than their perceptions of the children. This interpretation is indirectly supported by the large number of subjects who failed to complete the rating scales, and were thus excluded from the study. It may also be the case that, for these older adults, the labels provided for the tapes were not prominent enough to influence their perception. That is, the label provided in the instructions, and on the rating scale form itself, may not have caused the subjects to focus on gender as a major factor in the task. Neither of these alternative explanations is likely, however, in light of the significant

effects obtained for the TAS and D score analyses, to be discussed below.

The results of the TAS analysis are in part consistent with the conclusions of Meyer and Sobieszek (1972) and Sobieszek (1977). The expected same-sex bias in TAS was not obtained. However, as was found previously, female subjects were more likely than were male subjects to attribute more of all qualities to both the child labeled male and the child labeled female. The failure to find a same-sex bias is due to the very low TAS given by male subjects to the child labeled male. It is not clear, from the present study, why a same-sex bias was not obtained in this population of older adults.

Finally, the results of the D score analysis are also only partly consistent with the results of previous research. It was found, as in Sobieszek (1977) and Meyer and Sobieszek (1972) that males having low contact with children were the most stereotyping in their descriptions of child behavior. However, males having high contact with children engaged in reverse stereotyping, while females in general evidenced virtually no stereotyping. In this study males showed greater extremes in their perceptions (both stereotyping and reverse stereotyping) than did females. This finding is consistent with

literature showing men to be more concerned than women about sex-role typing in general (Emmerich, 1962; Goodenough, 1957). This greater concern may be manifested in the more extreme responses of males, while the direction of their response appears to be influenced by the amount of contact they have had with children. While in certain cases (low-contact males) stereotyping can be a powerful effect in the perception of child behavior, a high degree of contact with children can actually be associated with reverse stereotyping (high-contact males).

Clearly, the population of older adults presents a very different pattern of stereotyping than do the populations used in previous studies. Though these results may be due in part to the relatively small number of subjects having low contact with children, it is clear even for the more numerous high-contact subjects that sex-role stereotyping is not a uniform characteristic. The degree and even the direction of the stereotyping (or reverse stereotyping) is, according to the results obtained here, dependent upon the sex of the subject, the amount of contact with children, and the population being considered.

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Table 1

Mean Masculine Attribution Scale Scores for Sex of Subject and Label of Child

		Label of Child		
		F	M	Total
Sex of Subject	F (n = 32)	70.63	70.56	70.59
	M (n = 16)	69.44	69.44	69.44
	Total	70.22	70.19	

Table 2

Mean Total Activity Scale Scores for Sex of Subject and Label of Child

		Label of Child		
		F	M	Total
Sex of Subject	F (n = 32)	73.38	71.50	72.44
	M (n = 16)	70.31	66.69	68.50
	Total	72.36	69.90	

Table 3

Mean D Scores* for Sex of Subject and Contact

		Contact		
		High	Low	Total
Sex of Subject	F	.11 (n = 28)	-1.25 (n = 4)	-.06
	M	-8.30 (n = 10)	13.83 (n = 6	.00
	Total	-2.11	7.80	

* Positive score indicates that the child labeled as male was rated more masculine than the child labeled as female; negative score indicates that the child labeled as female was rated more masculine than the child labeled as male.